Open Air Schools

A Popular Exposition

Reprinted from The Christchurch "Press"

SECOND EDITION

PRICE 6d.

PUBLISHED BY THE OPEN-AIR SCHOOLS LEAGUE,
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THE PRIMARY OBJECTS OF THE LEAGUE ARE:—

1. The investigation of problems incidental to the school life of children, especially those which have reference to the establishment of such active and open-air conditions of schooling as are necessary for the child's mental and physical welfare.

2. The propagation of knowledge relating to these problems:—
   (a) By endeavouring to bring to the minds of the community the necessity for the interest of parents and others in the education of the child generally.
   (b) By insisting on the health of the child being given due consideration throughout the period of schooling.

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First Edition	-	-	*July, 1924*
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CATHEDRAL SQUARE, CHRISTCHURCH

Though not committing myself to all statements in this pamphlet, I can very whole-heartedly say that I think the author is on the right track. In my travels last month I came across two class-rooms of the open-air type. In each case I questioned the teachers and the pupils, and I found that both teacher and scholar were strongly in favour of the open-air rooms. The whole tendency among educationists nowadays is in the direction of erecting school-rooms of a much lighter and elastic type than heretofore. It is doubtful wisdom to build schools in massive concrete or brick, which will last a century, and which are almost impossible of remodelling or modification. I fear we all need education on the question of school buildings. The school building of thirty years ago is to-day hopelessly out of date, so great have been the changes in class teaching and class methods. Who will say that the brick school of to-day, erected by the State at heavy cost, will not be superseded in the next twenty or thirty years? Apart, however, from these considerations, which may be arguable, I am heartily in favour of experiment. I shall watch with keen and sympathetic interest further developments in school buildings in the direction so ably put before the public in this interesting booklet.

C. J. PARR,
Minister of Education.

Wellington, 27th June, 1924.

Since writing the above foreword I have closely investigated the working of the four open-air class-rooms at Christchurch, and as a result the favourable opinion I had formed previously has been confirmed and validated. I have found that wherever the teacher-in-charge is sympathetic, the open-air class-room is an undoubted success. I am satisfied that both pupil and teacher enjoy more robust health and display more alertness of mind and a keener spirit of work than in the ordinary class-room. Such also is the opinion of the four experienced headmasters in charge of these classes at Christchurch.

Largely as the result of my recent enquiry, I intend in the coming year to request the Education Boards of the Dominion generally to erect in suitable localities, in place of ordinary class-rooms, open-air class-rooms similar in type and construction to those at Fendalton and Cashmere. By such trials all over New Zealand I shall hope to arouse both Boards and teachers to a keener appreciation of the advantages of this type of school building. Nor shall I object, in some district where there is keen enthusiasm, to there being carried out a trial of a new type of school altogether, erected on the plan of separate open-air class-rooms with a central administration block. New Zealand's climate especially lends itself to the open-air principle of building.

C. J. PARR,
Minister of Education.

Wellington, 23rd December, 1925.

Open Air Schools

A Popular Exposition

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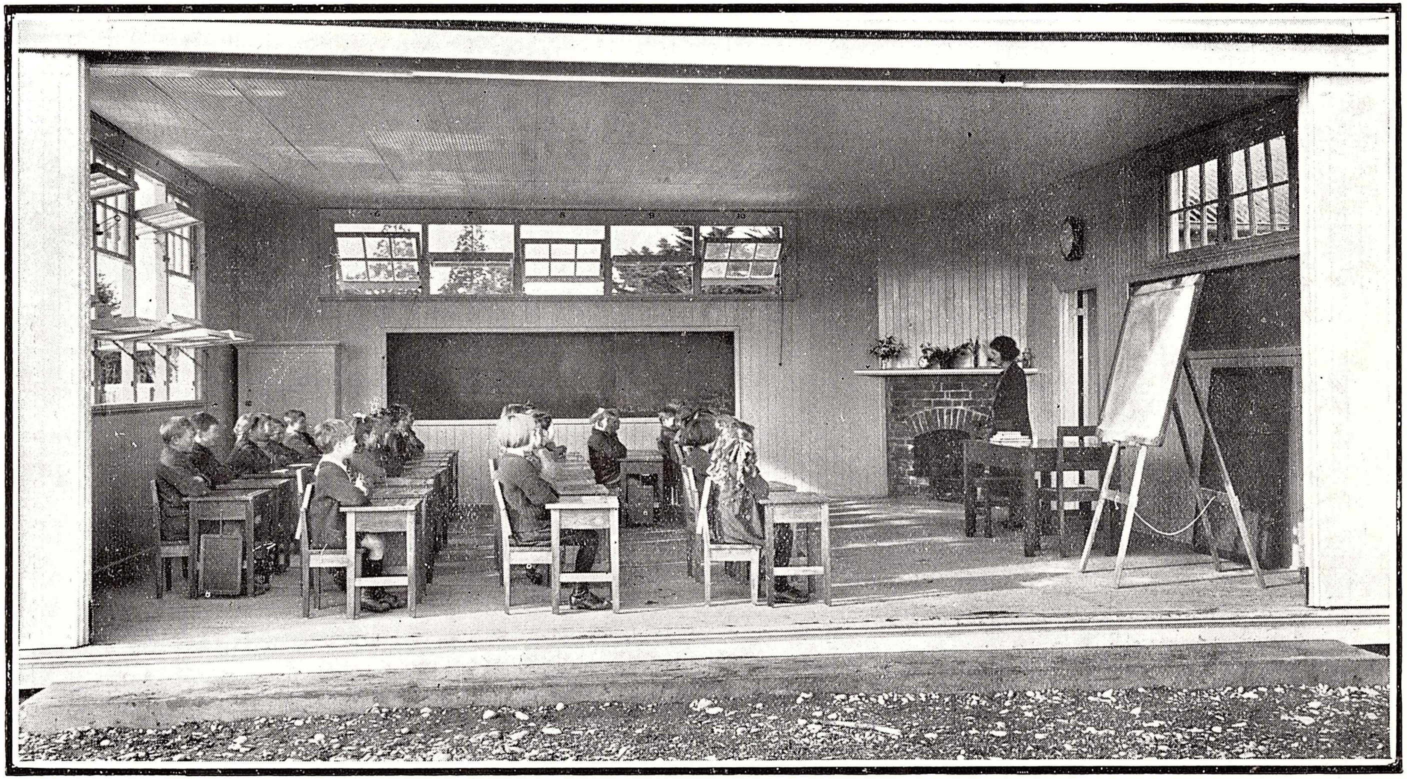
The rapid development of the open-air school throughout the civilised world is not surprising, since the advantages of such schools are so many and so obvious. What is really astonishing is that it should still be necessary in 1924 to point to the benefits of pure air and sunshine. Though it is easy to be extravagant, it is the simple fact that our present schools have an injurious influence on thousands of children every year. If the new schools, bathed in pure air and vitalising sunlight, do not turn them out to meet the world proof against colds and disease generally, they at least give them greatly-increased powers of resistance. Further, they can help us to stamp out tuberculosis, which should be unknown in such a country as this, and in addition they give greater mental efficiency. All this is to be obtained merely by throwing our schools open to cleansing, life-giving forces of Nature: the air and the sun which are still free in a world that puts a price even on water. The prejudice, born of ignorance, which has a positive horror of fresh air, and would be shocked by the children in the snow at Toronto's forest school, is fast dying out, and will soon have disappeared before the advance of science. .The day of the open-air school, and of the open-air home also, is dawning, and it is gratifying to find educational authorities in New Zealand awakening at last to the new knowledge.



THE BUNGALOW CLASSROOM—N.W. FRONT.

The sliding doors are shown open. The pivot-hung windows on the other three walls make cross ventilation possible whatever the direction of the wind. The large windows on the N.E. wall admit the sunshine in the morning, and the open N.W. front in the afternoon.

I.

Would Mean Closed Hospitals

A Case for Reform

More and more the world is coming to acknowledge the importance of the child. The temperance reformers and the Sunday schools were the first to recognise it, but it has taken the public mind a generation to realise that the world's hope of progress lies with the child.

The child being of supreme importance, what must be said of the school, which claims from the home the most impressionable years of life, receives the plastic mind and body, and delivers them six, eight, or twelve years later; the mind schooled to a mental outlook and habits, the body grown tall and strong, or weak and undersized? This is why school teachers are more important than politicians and generals.

Acknowledging, then, the school as the dynamic centre of life, the moulder of the future through the child, we must accept the corollary that its construction, equipment, system of work, and attitude towards its responsibility must be so ordered as knowledge declares to be in the best interests of the child.

Measured by this standard our schools are still a long way from 100 per cent. efficiency, though we can point, with just pride, to improvements since the time, not so long ago, when the school was an overcrowded place, usually lit from the wrong direction, hot in summer and cold in winter. There, behind closed doors and windows, a never-ending stream of facts, wholly unrelated, was forced into—perhaps it would be more correct to say through—the child's mind, under penalty of the cane or the strap in the cupboard. Examinations passed, the facts thus ''crammed'' were soon forgotten, until, if one were fortunate enough to have money to invest, one could scarcely reckon what it would amount to, with interest added, in five or ten years.

New Methods Coming.

Happily the entire educational outlook has changed. The schools are now feeling their way to a method of self-education and self-government, by which the child will be lured by its own natural curiosity, and powers of observation and reasoning, to learn, and, what is more, to remember what it has once learnt.

It cannot be said, however, that the schoolhouses themselves have kept pace with this progressive change on the educational side. They are still, the majority of them, overcrowded and badly ventilated, and the State pays in hospitals and loss of work for the resulting weak lungs and liability to disease. This is because the unnatural schoolhouse of 1924 robs the child of three of the five things vital to all growing creatures: fresh air, sun, exercise, sleep, and food and drink.

Unnatural Schools.

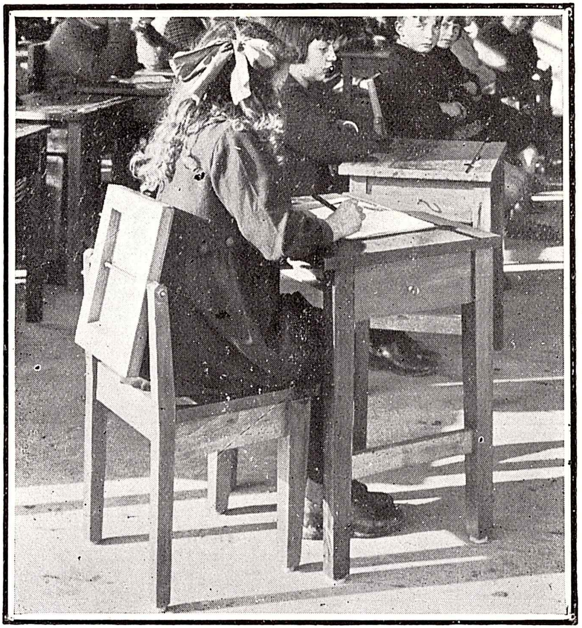
This aspect of school life—its artificiality, and the resulting restraint and nervous strain it imposes on the child—is not commonly considered at all, though educational experts are now agreed that it greatly retards both physical and mental development.

An English doctor has put it in this way:—

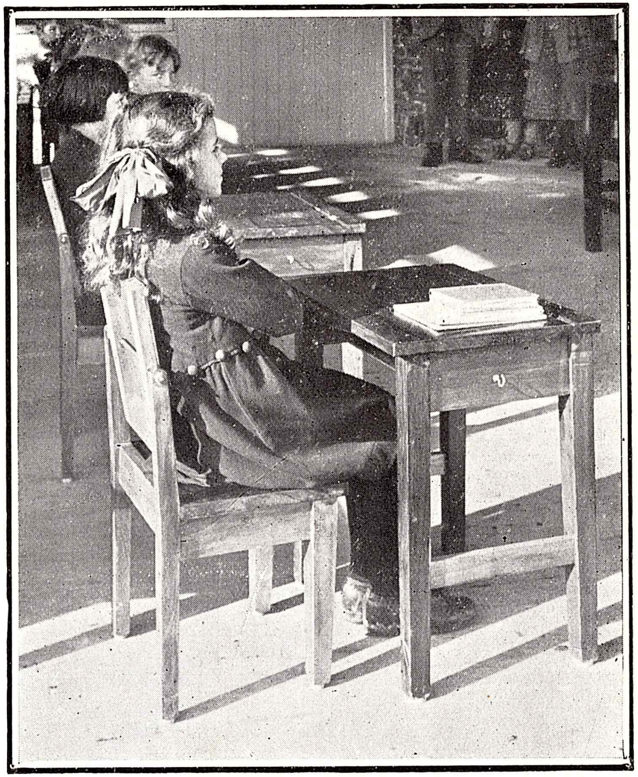
> ''I ask you to consider what an extremely unnatural and artificial process modern schooling necessarily is. In a natural state, what would be a child's daily routine? Each morning, when he had slept enough and been fed, he would escape into the open air, run wild, chase living things, and shout as much as he liked, without repression, until healthy hunger or fatigue drove him back to eat or sleep. His eyes would never be forced to look at minute work of any kind. His education would proceed along general elementary lines. He would learn that fire burnt you, that water wet you, and that bees and dogs retaliated if you annoyed them. Later he would learn, chiefly by imitation, the arts of the chase or of agriculture.
>
> ''Instead of this, what do we do? We take the child and shut him indoors for the sunniest hours of the day. We put him at work that hardly ever necessitates his getting out of breath or thoroughly filling his lungs with air. We make him sit still (a process utterly foreign to a child's nature) thereby slowing his circulation. We strain his eyes and develop his brain at the expense of energy and blood supply of every other organ—stomach, lungs, muscles, and bone. In our present state of civilisation schooling is necessary if children are to take their place in the world. I would only plead that it should be recognised how artificial the process is, that thereby some of its drawbacks may be ameliorated and its pitfalls avoided. If I were asked to enumerate the chief of them, I should say: Lack of oxygen from various causes, eye strain, over-work, deformities from faulty positions, infectious diseases.''

Sequel to Plunket System.

The whole case for the open-air school is that, if properly equipped and operated, it will do away with these evils;



The light portable separate table and chair. The pivoted back adjusts itself to the child's position.



Another view of the separate table and chair. Note hook for hanging school bag.

that it is the nearest approach possible to natural conditions, and, further, that it arouses a healthy interest and activity in the child which, in itself, is a most valuable factor in physical and mental development.

The open-air school is the logical sequel to the infant welfare work of the Plunket Society. Of what use is the lowest infantile death-rate in the world, if our schools, of all places, are to be allowed to endanger the physical development of the thousands of healthy youngsters who go to them every year? The growing movement in favour of open-air schools does in fact receive the warmest support and encouragement from parents whose experience with the Plunket system in their own homes has taught them that fresh air day and night—and it is only open air that is fresh—is the only road to healthy, happy childhood.

II.

Steps in Development

Open Air Classes and "School Journeys"

In the previous article the case for the open-air school, as a means of developing healthy minds in healthy bodies, was set out. It must not be supposed, however, that educational leaders jumped in one bound from the traditional barn type of school-house to the ideal class unit which, it is to be hoped, will gradually supersede our present buildings.

How many headmasters, under the strain of an overcrowded school on a hot summer's day, have sent a teacher out with a class to the nearest trees? Yet here we have the most primitive form of open-air instruction; classes in play-grounds, parks, or other open spaces. It is obvious that the extent to which this form of open-air instruction can be used depends on the absence of rain. Wind, up to what the sailor calls a "stiff breeze," need not keep a class indoors, and other disadvantages commonly urged are not so serious as they at first appear to be.

The first objection usually urged against such classes is that the children's attention will wander. This is true only when the classes are spasmodic. If it is the regular thing for the children to be instructed in the playground or park, they soon become used to their environment, and their attention is just as good as in the schoolhouse.

This has been proved by experience. One of the most striking examples of the possibility of teaching children under what would seem to be distracting circumstances can be found in London. Some gardens opposite private residences in the Euston road were used last summer by pupils from the neighbouring elementary school. As this road is one of the main links between the east and the west, and has in it the termini of three main railway lines from the north, it may be safely concluded that there is no playground in New Zealand with more unfavourable surroundings.

It is merely a question of habit. If the classes are the regular thing the children quickly become used to them and their work does not suffer.

The Wind Bogey.

Another objection often raised is the wind. Frightening pictures are drawn of pupils noisily chasing books and papers, while the mistress holds her hair together. Of course, shelter from strong winds and dust is necessary, but the wind bogey—which is really no bogey at all but a health-bringer—is overdone.

The annoyance of pages turning over in the wind is easily overcome with two spring paper clips, or elastic bands, if they are preferred for stiff-backed books. For writing purposes it would be a simple matter to supply the paper in blocks, similar to those used by artists for sketching, instead of in the form of exercise books as is done at present.

A more serious difficulty, that of seating accommodation, confronts schools which have to put up with the old-fashioned, spine-deforming, long forms and desks, on which children are herded together, irrespective of height and reach. These atrocities have been replaced in many schools by the almost equally clumsy dual desks, but, when all our junior class-rooms are equipped, as they should be, with the light, portable, individual table and chair, this difficulty will disappear.

In connexion with open-air classes, it remains to be added only that some schools in Christchurch are close to parks suitable for open-air instruction. Examples are West Christchurch, under the shady trees, and Sydenham, handy to Sydenham Park.

School Journeys.

Another form of open-air instruction, rarely attempted in our country, though in favour in England, is the "school journey." Children are encouraged to do a forenoon's good work by the promise that the afternoon will be devoted to a lesson in natural history or physical science somewhere, or a trip to the seashore, where they will learn—and, what is more important, understand—more about the horizon, the roundness of the earth, and the action of water on land than in hours of verbal explanation.

Educationists are at last beginning to realise that there is a better way of teaching the young than cramming; that seeing is believing, and understanding too. Experiment and practical illustration are being more used; teachers becoming more shepherds than drovers.

From this point of view "school journeys" have their value. But it is with their value as a break in the unnatural restraint of the schoolhouse, allowing lungs and cramped muscles to be stretched in the open air, that this article is most concerned. The fresh air value of school journeys is most appreciated in England, where classes are removed to the seaside or the country, from the thick air of the big cities, sometimes for days, or even for weeks.

The possibilities of the open-air class, and its modified form, the "school journey," however, must obviously always be strictly limited by weather conditions and local circumstances.

III.

The Ideal Design

Fresh Air in Any Wind

Until the time comes when all our schools have been remodelled on the open-air plan, the fresh-air classroom offers a means by which they may be greatly improved at a small cost. It is the ordinary classroom, cross-ventilated by some suitable type of large window, opening freely into the fresh air on both sides of the room.

It is essential that two sets of windows should be installed, on opposite walls, so that the classroom is constantly flushed out by the moving stream of air. Air is "fresh" only when it is in motion, and to ensure this cross-ventilation is necessary.

But, as will be shown, the open-air school possesses many additional advantages, which cannot be secured in the conventional type of building. This can be most easily explained by describing the experiment now being tried at Fendalton, in the plans for which are incorporated the best features of open-air school buildings as applicable to local conditions.

Detached Classrooms.

In the first place the new type of school differs from the traditional design in that it is really not one school, but several. Instead of the rambling, awe-inspiring building, with its many classrooms and noisy corridors, which we know so well, there is a separate bungalow for each class.

This innovation has four advantages.

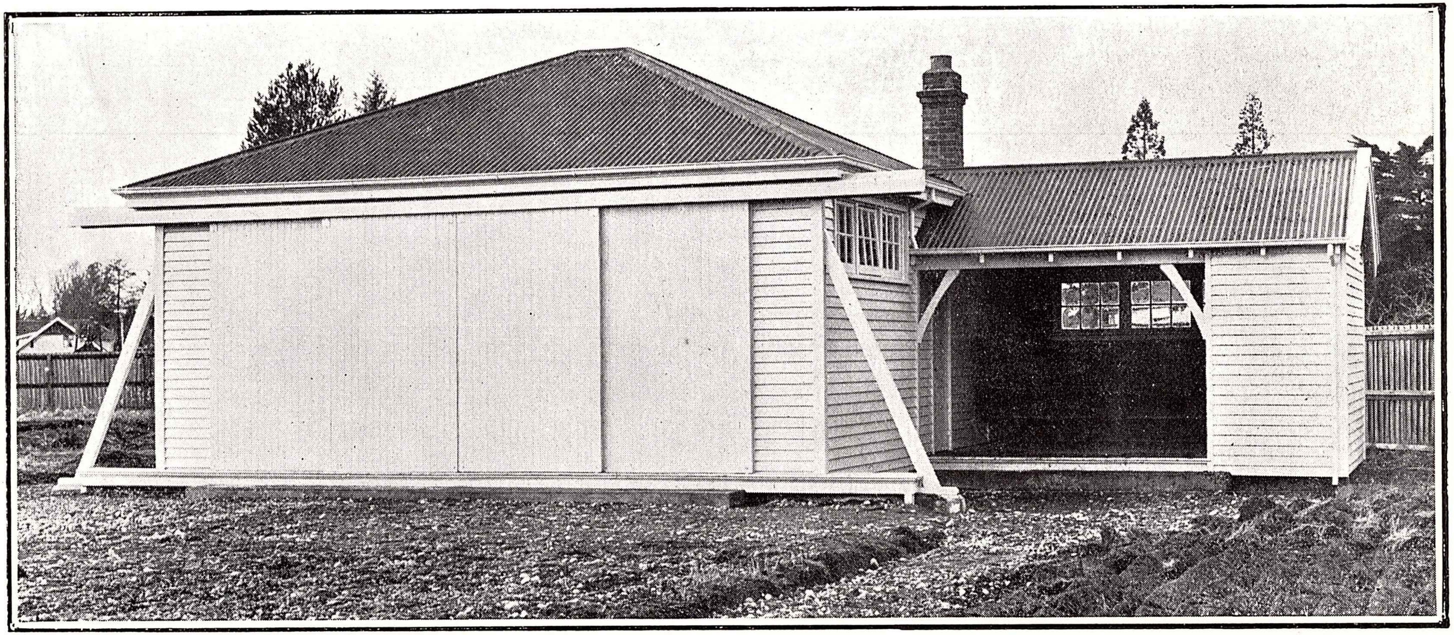
It does away with the distraction of neighbouring classes and noisy corridors.

It enables the classroom to be emptied rapidly and quietly through the open front without disturbing the other classes.

It enables the teacher to let the children out for a brisk run at the end of each half-hour's lesson, stretching tired muscles, and straightening little backs, quickening listless lungs, and toning up the circulation, so that the next lesson may be tackled with new energy.

And it gives the architect four walls to work on, and thus ensures a cross-current of constantly-renewed air whatever the direction of wind or rain.

The separate classroom also encourages progress through competition. Each class having a separate home of



THE BUNGALOW CLASSROOM—N.W. FRONT.
The sliding doors are shown closed to exclude a Nor'-wester.

its own, there is the same incentive to pride in its reputation as there is between the houses of an English public school. The separate classroom is, in fact, the key of the whole design.

The first thing to be determined is the direction in which the open front of the bungalow classroom will face, and this, of course, is determined by local conditions. The experimental one at Fendalton faces north-west, as records kept by Mr Skey, at the Magnetic Observatory, showing the direction and frequency of the wind over a period of 12 years, gives a total of 1739 days for north-east and east winds combined, and 1482 for south-west. North-west winds, it will be surprising to learn, totalled only 315.

Windows in Every Wall.

The bungalow, then, has been built with an opening front of sliding doors to the north-west, and an opposite row of windows on the south-east wall. On days when the nor'-wester blows, two sets of windows on the other two walls will be opened. There will be a cloak-shed, facing north-west, again with windows on the wall behind the usual open front of the play sheds, and the plan provides for a fireplace and cupboard. Light, portable, individual tables and chairs, as was shown in the previous article, are the ideal seating accommodation, making play-ground classes easy, as well as preventing bent backs and cramped chests.

In no building is it possible to obtain the same qualities in the air that we find out of doors; but such a type of open-air school secures for the children the maximum obtainable of fresh air and sunlight. If individual seating is installed, we have ideal conditions. The rest lies with the teacher.

IV.

Cheapest and Best

Checking Infectious Diseases

In article III. an ideal type of open-air school was described in detail, and it was explained how, by flooding the detached classrooms with fresh air and sunlight, and making it possible for the children to be frequently exercised for short intervals, without causing disturbance or inconvenience to the rest of the classrooms, the open-air school avoided all the defects of the unscientific and out-of-date buildings that at present disfigure the educational world.

The abundance of sun and air also has an invaluable effect in lessening the risk of infectious diseases, and checking any latent tendency in a child towards tuberculosis. Further, in the case of an outbreak of infectious disease only the bungalows affected would need to be closed, as the children of the class would mix with those of others only in the open air.

There is one more advantage which the open-air school possesses, and which should clinch the argument in its favour with school committees and education boards—its cheapness.

Too often governing educational bodies are asked to do the impossible with what is saved for them from the welter of demands for roads, bridges, railways, increased wages, and decreased service charges which the Minister of Finance has to dispose of somehow or other. Here is a paragon, possessing all the virtues required in it by doctors and teachers, and yet costing less than the inferior current type of school building. It sounds like a politician's dream, but it is true.

Cheap Building.

The experimental classroom built at Fendalton* cost roughly £400. It is designed for sixty children, and measures 26ft x 24ft x 10ft. The height is ample. With constantly renewed air the school is healthier than the old-fashioned, high-ceilinged, ill-ventilated room.

The price, of course, is for wooden construction, but it is the kind of construction that lasts a lifetime, and there is a period beyond which it is not economically sound to build, since requirements may change altogether during the time.

At this rate a school for 660 pupils could be built for £6000, allowing £1600 for central offices and lay-out. The bungalow classrooms would be grouped on the same principles that determined their design, so as to secure the maximum possible of fresh air and sunlight. The essential condition would be that the sun should reach each one, and therefore, of course, they would all face in the same direction.

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*NOTE.—Five classrooms of this design have now (Dec., 1925) been built in Christchurch: one for St. Mark's Church, at Opawa; the remaining four at State Schools—two at Fendalton, and one each at Cashmere and Linwood.

Preventing Disease.

The open-air school began in special schools for physically defective or ailing children, just as it is commonly supposed to be the prime duty of doctors to cure disease. The results of the first experiment at Charlottenburg (Germany) were highly encouraging, and the success achieved there has been maintained wherever a trial has been made.

Thirty-four children suffered from anaemia, 38 from scrofulous diseases, 14 from heart diseases, and 21 from pulmonary disease. In the first season the school was open for only three months; yet, in that short time, 25 children were completely cured, and 48 showed distinct improvement. The average increase in weight was about half a pound a week for each child, and in mental alertness and general cheerfulness there was a marked advance.

It was soon realised that what cured the sick and ailing would keep them well, and maintain the resistant powers of healthy children to disease. Thus the open-air school linked up with the trend of medical science towards the preventive side of the work. To revert to the Plunket Society—of which, as we showed before, the open-air school is the logical sequel—it is now being realised that it is better to maintain a fence at the top of the cliff than an ambulance at the bottom.

V.

History Since 1904

New Zealand Trials

It is to Germany that we must give the credit for the first open-air school, which was started in Charlottenburg in 1904. In the last article we told of its success with sick and ailing children, and showed how it was then realised that what turned weaklings into healthy children would develop in healthy youngsters a sturdy resistance to disease.

The experiment in the forest of Charlottenburg was closely watched, and, as soon as its success was perceived, was followed up by Britain and America.

In England the first open-air school was started by the London County Council in 1907, and the next year three more were added. In 1919, 40 new open-air schools were under consideration by the Board of Education; while to-day it is the settled policy of the Derbyshire Education Committee that all new schools built by them shall be open-air schools.

The first open-air school in the United States was built at Providence in 1908. The idea has been gradually spreading through the United States, until to-day there are no less than eight hundred open-air schools, and nearly five thousand open-window classrooms harbouring twenty thousand children from Maine to California. There could be no stronger vindication of the principles behind the movement than its success in such an extraordinary range of climates.

Glasgow, Toronto, Montreal, and Florence (Italy) might be mentioned as further instances of the universal application of the open-air school system.

In New Zealand.

In the South Island one of the pioneers is Archerfield, a private college for girls in stormy Dunedin, where fresh air enables the pupils to defy the winter. Nearer home St. Saviour's Orphanage and the fresh-air school at Sumner.

To the mind accustomed to the solid, imposing structure, the bungalow type appears strange at first. Committees and Boards cannot always be persuaded that there is not an inherent virtue in a mere pile, and prefer the self-contained block with which their minds are familiar. The advantages of the bungalow type, however, will establish its claims in time.

The popular prejudice against free currents of air, as the source of colds in the head, will also join the limbo of exploded bogeys.

The medical explanation is that people who have been infected many hours before are more liable to feel discomfort owing to the absorption of the bacterial toxin, or damaged tissue products, and the consequent derangement of the body's heat-regulating mechanism. So the person with a fullyhatched cold, feeling cold, blames what he calls the "draught," as—and because—his father did before him.

Parents need not fear to send their children to the open-air school on this ground. On the contrary, it will render them much less susceptible to colds and other complaints.

The Teacher's Part.

It is essential, of course, that teachers in charge of open-air schools should themselves have been trained in their operation and advantages; otherwise the schools might be open to the air only on days when the inspector was due.

With sympathy and understanding on the part of the teacher it will be found that the results obtained on the educational side are equal to the physical benefits. Experience has proved this since Charlottenburg days. Physical health is reflected in mental efficiency. We could not conclude more fittingly than with this testimony of a New Zealand teacher:—

"Our examination results show the effect on the girls' ability to work. The inspector who examined them said he did not feel fatigued himself, nor did he see any sign of it, mentally or physically, in the students he examined."

NOTE BY THE EDITOR OF "THE PRESS."

It is pleasant to know that a second edition of this little pamphlet has been called for, and that the movement for the provision of healthier schools is growing in strength. To those of us who have been filled with bewilderment and distrust by the rush of theories concerning the principles of education, it is a comfort to know that at any rate there is little doubt concerning the conditions under which our children shall receive instruction. The open-air school has to meet with a good deal of opposition, in the shape of material interests, and, what is just as troublesome, mere prejudice and obstinacy. Fortunately the movement, in Canterbury at least, is backed by men whose support would be a recommendation of any cause, and as these men are actuated by a disinterested public spirit, the time is sure to come when the wholesome ideals of the movement will be fully realised.

M. C. KEANE.

Christchurch, 30th December, 1925.

PRESS NOTICES.

"This excellent little pamphlet."

—Lancet.

"This admirable plea for the open-air school."

—Scottish Educational Journal.

"Can usefully find a place in a doctor's waiting-room."

—N.Z. Medical Journal.

"An interesting contribution to the literature of the subject."

—National Education.

"A really excellent popular exposition."

—Medical Officer (London).

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Christchurch, N.Z.,

Nov.20th.

Dear Mr Soal,

It gives the Executive much pleasure to welcome you as a Member of the Open Air Schools League.

We are using our best endeavours to make Schooling healthier and happier for our children, it therefore gives us much encouragement to have your help and support.

The primary objects of the League are :-

1. The investigation of problems incidental to the school life of children; especially those which have reference to the establishment of such active and open air conditions of schooling as are necessary for the child's mental and physical welfare.

2. The propagation of knowledge relating to these problems :-

   (a) By endeavouring to bring to the minds of the community the necessity for the interest of parents and others in the education of the child generally.

   (b) By insisting on the health of the child being given due consideration throughout the period of schooling.

The rapid development of the Open Air School is set out very clearly by Mr.I.G.MacInnes in a booklet which is forwarded to you gratis under separate cover.

On behalf of the Executive
Yours faithfully.

A.E. Loach.